

‘The One Life within Us and Abroad’: Pathetic Fallacy Reconsidered

Gavin Hopps,
University of St Andrews

[...] living things, and things inanimate,
Do speak, at Heaven’s command, to eye and ear,
And speak to social reason’s inner sense,
With inarticulate language.¹

John Ruskin believed in the ‘mediatorial ministries of nature’ and his writings are filled with delicate, vivid and ingenious descriptions of how, in the words of the Psalmist, ‘the heavens declare the glory of God’.² And yet he is also inadvertently responsible for a critical notion that has obscured the theological significance of literary depictions of nature. That critical notion is ‘pathetic fallacy’. In this chapter, I want to reconsider what might be signified by ‘pathetic fallacy’, to highlight the presuppositions built into the notion, to reveal the theological alternative that these presuppositions conceal – which is itself present in Ruskin’s work – and to show how this alternative theological model opens up fresh ways of reading Romantic literature.

I Ontological Scandal

At first glance, the issue might appear to be fairly straightforward. Where human traits are ascribed to inanimate or non-human phenomena, we have – so handbooks of

¹ Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, IV, 1204-7. Except for *The Prelude*, all references to Wordsworth’s poetry are taken from *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (eds.), 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940-49). Quotations from the former are taken from *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*, Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams and Stephen Gill (eds.) (New York: Norton, 1979).

² According to Michael Wheeler, the central theme of *Modern Painters* is ‘mediation, between God and man, heaven and earth, through divine revelation, through natural phenomena, through human agency.’ (Wheeler, *Ruskin’s God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 34.) For Ruskin’s discussion of ‘the ordinance of the firmament’ and its ‘mediatorial ministries’, see *Modern Painters*, vol. IV, ‘The Firmament’.

literary terms inform us – an instance of ‘pathetic fallacy’.³ And yet certain problems immediately arise as soon as we reflect on what this assumes. Are the boundaries between the animate and inanimate, nature and culture, the human, animal and machine etc. so easy once and for all to draw? Contemporary developments would seem to suggest otherwise. Indeed, one of the most prominent features of postmodernity is the unsettling or blurring of precisely such boundaries – which are exposed as contingent cultural constructions – and a corollary repudiation of essentializing definitions.

To illustrate this, one might point towards the burgeoning diversity of work on the ‘post-human’ or the proliferation of interest in the ‘excluded third’, both of which undermine accepted dualisms and open up ‘zones of indistinction’ between subject and object, inside and outside, natural and artificial etc.⁴ Salient examples of such work include: Donna Haraway’s feminist appropriation of the cyborg as a destabilizing hybrid or ‘boundary creature’;⁵ Bernard Stiegler’s reflections on the prosthetic exteriorization of the human and ‘technics’ as ‘the pursuit of life by means other than life’;⁶ the baroque heterogeneities of Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘assemblages’ and ‘becomings’, which challenge traditional notions of subjectivity and being;⁷ the

³ As Jeffrey Hurwit has noted, ‘the pathos has largely gone out of the pathetic fallacy’ (‘Palm Trees and the Pathetic Fallacy in Archaic Greek Poetry and Art’, *The Classical Journal*, 77.3 (1982), p. 193). Originally, when the term was coined by Ruskin in 1856, it referred to a ‘falseness in all our impressions of external things’ that was engendered by ‘violent feelings’ (*Modern Painters*, vol. III (London: George Allen, 1906), p. 165). Today, however, ‘pathetic fallacy’ tends to be seen more loosely as a species of personification and is ‘held to operate when there is any projection of human traits into nature or its animate or inanimate parts [...] whatever the stimulus’ (Hurwit, *ibid.*).

⁴ The ‘excluded third’ and ‘zones of indistinction’ are concepts central to work of Michel Serres and Giorgio Agamben, respectively. See, for example, Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982) and Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

⁵ Donna Haraway, ‘A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century’, in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 2.

⁶ Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, I: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 17.

⁷ See, for example, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (New York: Continuum, 1980).

‘unhomely’ between of Derridean spectrality and ‘hauntology’, which muddle the categories of the living and the dead;⁸ Silvia Benso’s Levinasian account of the ‘faciality’ of insentient things;⁹ Mario Perniola’s writing on the ‘sex appeal’ of the inorganic, whose mode of being ‘between life and death’ is compared to the ‘postvital, posthuman, pre-mortuary, and pre-funerary’ condition of the vampire;¹⁰ Agamben’s ruminations on ‘bare life’, the ‘anthropological machine’ or the ‘indefinite being’ of the ‘Muselmann’;¹¹ and the lyrical meditations of Michel Serres on Hermes figures, parasites and the ‘angelic’ flows of information that subvert the distinction between the animate and inanimate.¹² In spite of their manifest differences, all of these projects are more generally engaged in ‘deconstructing essentialist and universalist claims that human beings and nature are ontological and epistemological givens, prior to all construction and representation.’¹³ On this evidence, what we seem to be witnessing within postmodernity is what Elaine Graham has evocatively referred to as a dissolution of the ‘ontological hygiene’ with which Western culture has delineated the boundaries between the human and non-human, nature and culture, organism and machine etc.¹⁴

There is another problem, though, with the assumptions underlying the notion of ‘pathetic fallacy’, which has less to do with the anti-essentialism of postmodernity and more to do with traditional theological concerns. The nature of this problem may

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994).

⁹ Silvia Benso, *The Face of Things: A Different Side of Ethics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000).

¹⁰ Mario Perniola, *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic: Philosophies of Desire in the Modern World*, trans. Massimo Verdicchio (New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 76.

¹¹ See, for instance, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), *passim*; and *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002), p. 48.

¹² See *Atlas*, trans. Steven Connor (Paris: Julliard, 1994) and *Angels: A Modern Myth*, trans. Francis Cowper (Paris: Flammarion, 1995).

¹³ Gregory Castle, *The Literary Theory Handbook* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p. 270.

¹⁴ Elaine Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human: Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 11.

be indicated as follows. If the divine is in some sense mediated by creation – as Scripture teaches and Ruskin affirms – how do we represent this act of mediation? To put this another way, if the created order participates in and analogically communicates something of its Creator, it may be said to possess an ‘excessive’ dimension or mysterious depth that paradoxically is and is not its own.¹⁵ What kind of ontology does this entail? At stake here is an altogether different kind of subversion, which, without abolishing quotidian distinctions, sunders the self-identity of phenomena. This sounds rather bizarre of course, but as the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins reveals, it describes an orthodox Christian vision:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil [...].
(‘God’s Grandeur’, 1-2)¹⁶

Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men’s faces.
(‘As kingfishers catch fire’, 12-14)

Created phenomena, without in any sense ceasing to be themselves, are shot through with an in-dwelling otherness that animates their being (the world is ‘charged’ with the grandeur of God), whilst the divine is made manifest by something other than itself (Christ is ‘lovely in eyes not his’), which results in a paradoxically shared embodiment, such that nature is more than it is. This ‘sacramental’ vision of nature has been helpfully described by Jacques Maritain:

Things are not only what they are [...]. They ceaselessly pass beyond themselves, and give more than they have, because from all sides they are permeated by the activating influx of the Prime Cause.¹⁹

¹⁵ In his reading of Augustine’s *De Doctrina*, Rowan Williams speaks of the Incarnation as a *hermeneutical* event, which reveals that created phenomena are capable of opening out beyond themselves to mean or communicate more than they are. (See chapter 12.)

¹⁶ All references to Hopkins’ poetry are taken from *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, W.H. Gardner and N.H. Mackenzie (eds.) (London: Oxford University Press, 1967).

How can we represent such a vision of nature, in which things ‘are not only what they are’ and ‘give more than they have’? The problem isn’t simply the self-transcending character of created phenomena; it is further complicated by the nature of that ‘more’. For, if that which is revealed by the created order is, of its nature, infinite and eternal or ‘in excess of’ being, and if our only means of representation are finite, how can we depict this ‘excess’?

One possibility is illustrated by Augustine in Book X of *Confessions*, where he famously asks ‘what do I love when I love my God?’ and ponders the role of the created order in his relationship with the divine.²⁰ The first answer he gives in the great defence of natural theology that ensues prepares the way for his personification of the landscape:

Not material beauty or beauty of a temporal order; not the brilliance of earthly light, so welcome to our eyes; not the sweet melody of harmony and song; not the fragrance of flowers, perfumes, and spices; not manna or honey; not limbs such as the body delights to embrace. It is not these that I love when I love my God. And yet, when I love him, it is true that I love a light of a certain kind, a voice, a perfume, a food, an embrace [...].²¹

Augustine’s ‘Not ... And yet’ posture towards the created order – which Michael Hanby has referred to as a ‘paradoxical double turn to God, at once both toward *and* away from the world’²² – steers a middle course between gnosticism and idolatry, though it also sets in motion an ontological flickering that is dramatized in the famous colloquy with nature:

¹⁹ Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: Meridian, 1953), p. 127.

²⁰ M.H. Abrams has compared Augustine’s colloquy with nature to Wordsworth’s moments of communion with ‘the speaking face of heaven and earth’, remarking that the latter is ‘a lineal descendent of the ancient Christian concept of the *liber naturae*, whose symbols bespeak the attributes and intentions of its author.’ (*Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: Norton, 1971), p. 88.)

²¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), p. 211.

²² Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 170.

I put my question to the earth. It answered, 'I am not God', and all things on earth declared the same. I asked the sea and the chasms of the deep and the living things that creep in them, but they answered, 'We are not your God. Seek what is above us.' [...] I spoke to all the things that are about me, all that can be admitted by the door of the senses, and I said, 'Since you are not my God, tell me about him.' [...] Clear and loud they answered, 'God is he who made us.' I asked these questions simply by gazing at these things, and their beauty was all the answer they gave.²³

This second answer clarifies Augustine's 'Not ... And yet' posture: what he is looking for is *not* any part or all of creation, *and yet* created phenomena can tell us about and direct us towards the God he seeks. His manner of staging the inquiry, however, is also itself a sort of answer; for in making use of 'pathetic fallacy' in exploring the relationship between creation and Creator, Augustine presents us with a 'more' in nature that in some sense is and is not its own (since creation doesn't actually speak, although its beauty is a kind of voice),²⁴ which imitates the 'sojourning' ontology of the divine (as this transcends but is communicated by created being). It seems therefore from Augustine's colloquy with nature – in which he reflects upon modes of mute articulacy ('I asked these questions simply by gazing at these things, and their beauty was all the answer they gave') – that 'pathetic fallacy' may be a peculiarly appropriate way of representing a 'foreign luminosity' within nature and the ontological flickering of mediated presence.²⁵

What this brief introduction of theological concerns brings to light is an 'ontological scandal',²⁶ which radically problematizes the conception of nature upon which the notion of 'pathetic fallacy' rests. In view of this 'scandal', a strictly realist

²³ Ibid., p. 212.

²⁴ See Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Call and Response*, trans. Anne A. Davenport (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004).

²⁵ The phrase 'foreign luminosity' is borrowed from Michel de Certeau's discussion of Hieronymus Bosch in *The Mystic Fable, Volume One: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 58.

²⁶ Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 81ff.

mode of representation would amount to a *falsification* of nature. Instead, paradoxically, in order to depict things as they are from this standpoint, it would be necessary to present them as *more* than they are. Commenting on Maritain's 'ontological' conception of poesis, Rowan Williams has relatedly observed: 'the artist *does* set out to change the world, but – if we can manage the paradox – to change it into itself.'²⁷

One might of course object that one doesn't believe in such a theological vision; however, this only reinforces the underlying point that interpretations of 'pathetic fallacy' are to some extent dependent on our manifestly contestable beliefs about the ultimate nature of reality. More precisely, if we believe there is nothing more to reality than its material appearances, then any ascription of animacy or personhood to inorganic matter will be a form of fiction and could correctly be characterized as 'pathetic fallacy'. As Ruskin says of Wendell Holmes' 'spendthrift crocus': it is 'very beautiful, and yet very untrue.'²⁸ If, however, we are prepared to countenance the possibility that the created order participates in, is permeated by, and thus analogically reflects its transcendent Creator, then intimations of animacy or personhood will not necessarily be a matter of fiction. Rather, they may be an attempt by way of non-naturalistic figurations to depict an otherwise inexpressible reality. It would therefore be a mistake to label such figurations 'pathetic fallacy'.

The distinction I am attempting to tease out between different uses of animistic figurations may be clarified with reference to Jean-Luc Marion's account of the icon and the idol. Very briefly, Marion sets out a distinction not between two objects or types of depiction, in terms of their substantive properties, but between two

²⁷ Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 18.

²⁸ Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol. III, p. 164.

kinds of referentiality, in terms of their function or the comportment they elicit.²⁹ On the one hand, the idol is constituted by a gaze that terminates in and is exhausted by its object, whilst on the other hand the icon orients the gaze beyond itself towards that which is unenvisageable. Along these lines, we might distinguish – in theory, if not in practice – between ‘immanent’ and ‘transcendent’ uses of ‘pathetic fallacy’ – that is, between animistic figurations that metaphorically refer to certain realities (or, in presenting a distorted vision, reflect a *psychological* truth) but do not aspire beyond the plane of finitude, and those that serve an ‘iconic’ function, in pointing catachrestically towards that which is ‘without being’. (Orthodox icons similarly employ alogical forms, non-naturalistic figurations or what Leonid Ouspensky describes as ‘a certain pictorial “foolishness”’³⁰ as part of a referential strategy – even as they swerve away from things as they are – since what they present us with is a proleptic vision of a *transfigured* universe.) What, in short, I am suggesting, then, is that ‘pathetic fallacy’ – where it registers an intimation of presence or personhood that exceeds but is mediated by the natural order – is not necessarily either ‘pathetic’ or fallacious and may instead be a literary fashioning of ‘icons’.

II Transcendental Realism

Ruskin does not refer to icons in his ruminations on figurative language, but he does – in a number of separate discussions – outline a positive variant of ‘pathetic fallacy’ that is consonant with the foregoing ‘iconic’ model.³¹ We find embryonic

²⁹ Marion, *God without Being: Hors Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

³⁰ Ouspensky, ‘The Meaning and Content of the Icon’, in *Eastern Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader*, Daniel B. Clendenin (ed.) (Michigan: Baker Academic, 1995), p. 61.

³¹ It is also worth noting that Ruskin’s more general Romantic contrast between imagination and fancy converges towards Marion’s distinction between the enclosed immanence of the idol and the infinite orientation of the icon: ‘Fancy plays like a squirrel in its circular prison, and is happy: but Imagination is a pilgrim on the earth – and her home is in heaven.’ (*Modern Painters*, vol. II, p. 205.)

speculations on the subject in a letter written to Walter Brown in 1847, almost ten years before the publication of *Modern Painters* III, in which the discussion of ‘pathetic fallacy’ appears. This early exploration of the idea is of particular relevance to our present discussion as it clearly shows the influence of Wordsworth’s poetry:

there was a time when the sight of a steep hill covered with pines, cutting against the sky, would have touched me with an emotion inexpressible, which, in the endeavour to communicate in its truth and intensity, I must have sought for all kinds of far-off, wild, and dreamy images. Now I can look at such a slope with coolness, and observation of *fact*. I see that it slopes at 20° or 25°; I know the pines are spruce fir – ‘*Pinus nigra*’ – of such and such an age; that the rocks are slate of such and such a formation; the soil, thus, and thus; the day fine, the sky blue. All this I can at once communicate in so many words, and this is all which is necessarily seen. But it is not all the truth; there is something else to be seen there, which I cannot see but in a certain condition of mind, nor can I make any one else see it, but by putting him into that condition, and my endeavour in description would be, not to detail the facts of the scene, but by any means whatsoever to put my hearer’s mind into the same ferment as my mind [...].³²

Here we have a ‘meta’ account of a vision of nature, in which, according to Ruskin:

(i) the ‘facts’ do not completely coincide with ‘the truth’; (ii) the ‘something else’ that eludes the ‘facts’ isn’t always apparent and depends upon ‘a certain condition of mind’ that needs to be artificially induced in the audience; and (iii) the author is prepared to use ‘any means whatsoever’ in order aesthetically to elicit this condition – which seemingly includes ‘all kinds of far-off, wild and dreamy images’. Thus, it seems, not only are radical figurative distortions justified in representations of nature, they are in Ruskin’s view paradoxically *necessary* – as a matter of ontological fidelity – in order to depict things as they are. How representative of Ruskin’s views is this account?

³² Ruskin, Letter to Rev. W.L. Brown, September 28, 1847, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (eds.) (London: George Allen, 1912), vol. XXXVI, p. 80.

We find a more sustained and explicitly theological endorsement of this kind of argument in ‘The Moral of the Landscape’ in *Modern Painters* III, a few chapters after the more famous discussion of ‘pathetic fallacy’. Given the relative unfamiliarity of this subsequent account, it is worth quoting at some length:

we see in this [Scriptural view of nature] that the instinct which leads us thus to attribute life to the lowest forms of organic nature, does not necessarily spring from faithlessness, nor the deducing a moral out of them from an irregular and languid conscientiousness. In this, as in almost all things connected with moral discipline, the same results may follow from contrary causes; and as there are a good and evil contentment, a good and evil discontent, a good and evil care, fear, ambition, and so on, there are also good and evil forms of this sympathy with nature, and disposition to moralize over it. In general, active men, of strong sense and stern principle, do not care to see anything in a leaf, but vegetable tissue [...] hence there is a strong presumption, when first we perceive a tendency in any one to regard trees as living, and enunciate moral aphorisms over every pebble they stumble against, that such tendency proceeds from a morbid temperament [...]. But when the active life is nobly fulfilled, and the mind is then raised beyond it into clear and calm beholding of the world around us, the same tendency again manifests itself in the most sacred way: the simplest forms of nature are strangely animated by the sense of the Divine presence; the trees and flowers seem all, in a sort, children of God; and we ourselves, their fellows, made out of the same dust, and greater than they only in having a greater portion of the Divine power exerted on our frame, and all the common uses and palpably visible forms of things, become subordinate in our minds to their inner glory, to the mysterious voices in which they talk to us about God, and the changeful and typical aspects by which they witness to us of holy truth [...].³³

This section of *Modern Painters* represents a crucial qualification of the earlier discussion of ‘pathetic fallacy’. For what is revealed here is that Ruskin recognizes *two* versions of the act of attributing life to nature, only one of which is deemed to be fallacious, whilst the other is seen as a ‘sacred’ or revelatory act that attempts to depict the ultimate nature of things.³⁴ Manifestly, this ultimate reality cannot be

³³ *Modern Painters*, vol. III, p. 324.

³⁴ Jonathan Bate has also drawn attention to the way in which ‘The Moral of the Landscape’ qualifies Ruskin’s chapter on ‘pathetic fallacy’. ‘In this extraordinary analysis’, he writes, ‘Ruskin puts God back into nature, in defiance of the tendency of his age, which [...] he took to be the substitution of the material for the spiritual [...] and the relegation of God to “a dim, slightly credited animation in the

represented without a figurative swerve, as the advertised stammering of ‘seem all, in a sort’ suggests. Yet what this second account of animistic figurations also makes clear is that, for Ruskin, nature is *in fact* ‘strangely animated’ by a divine presence – it’s just that custom has bedimmed its lustre. Thus, according to Ruskin, what tends uniformly to be identified as ‘pathetic fallacy’ may in some circumstances turn out to be a form of ‘apocalyptic impressionism’ or ‘transcendental realism’.³⁵

Whilst the fame of Ruskin’s ‘pathetic fallacy’ has all but eclipsed this theological counter-model – and encouraged a misreading of Romantic moments of vision in the process – this kind of dualistic interpretation, which seeks to separate out truthful and fallacious modes of representation is characteristic of Ruskin’s thinking. Indeed, we find several instances of this tendency in *Modern Painters* III. In his discussion of ‘The False Ideal’, for example, Ruskin distinguishes on the one hand between an ‘abuse’ of the imagination, which is concerned with ‘the impossible’ or ‘untrue’ and creates ‘false images’ for ‘mere pleasure’, and on the other a ‘legitimate’ or ‘honest’ use of the imagination, which is conversely concerned with ‘giving full power and presence to the possible and true.’³⁶ Contrary to what we might expect, though, this distinction does not correspond to the material and immaterial or actual and ideal, but is rather drawn *within* the realm of ‘things which cannot be perceived by the senses.’³⁷ Accordingly, Ruskin includes under ‘true’ or ‘legitimate’ uses of the imagination: visions of things ‘belonging to our future state or invisibly surrounding us in this’; ‘the ministry of angels beside us’; the giving to ‘mental truths some visible type in allegory, simile, or personification, which shall more deeply enforce them’;

natural object” that has more to do with the perceiving mind than any intrinsic truth.’ (*Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 78.)

³⁵ The first phrase is used by Harold Bloom to describe Ruskin’s theory of revelatory poesis (*The Literary Criticism of John Ruskin* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. xx); the second is borrowed from Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, p. 21.

³⁶ *Modern Painters*, vol. III, pp. 49-50.

³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 49.

and even the act of refreshing the mind ‘with the suggestive voices of natural things, permitting it to possess living companionship, instead of silent beauty, and create for itself fairies in the grass, and naiads in the wave.’³⁸ It would seem therefore from this account, firstly, that there are for Ruskin more things in heaven and earth than are encompassed in his chapter on ‘pathetic fallacy’; and, secondly, that not all figurations of the immaterial – which may require the use of ‘allegory, simile, or personification’ – are considered by Ruskin to be fallacious. On the contrary, figurative representations of unembodied presences, things that invisibly surround us or the ‘suggestive voices of natural things’ may, for Ruskin, be ‘real visions of real things’.³⁹

In between the chapters on ‘The False Ideal’ and ‘The Pathetic Fallacy’ there is another on the ‘grotesque’, in which we find a parallel distinction, already adumbrated in *The Stones of Venice* (1851-3), between a ‘true’ or ‘noble’ and a ‘false’ grotesque. Once again, this concerns a distinction that is internal to the realm of the imagination – that is to say, it does not correspond to the difference between the factual and the fictional, but is drawn according to differences in the manner of imagining (Ruskin illustrates his point by distinguishing between ‘true’ and ‘false’ griffins) – which once again makes clear that for Ruskin not all ‘excessive’ figurations are fallacious. What this adds to the earlier discussion, though, is a sense that certain realities, by dint of their nature, can *only* be signified catachrestically, by means of ‘allegory, simile, or personification’. As Ruskin explains it, the ‘noble’ grotesque ‘arises out of the use or fancy of tangible signs to set forth an otherwise less expressible truth’.⁴⁰ And for Ruskin the highest form of such truth is religious:

³⁸ Ibid. p. 50.

³⁹ Ibid. p. 62.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 101.

in all ages and among all nations, grotesque idealism has been the element through which the most appalling and eventful truth has been wisely conveyed, from the most sublime words of true Revelation, to the ‘ἄλ λ ’ ὄ τ ’ ἄ ν ἡ μ ί ο ν ο ζ β α σ ι λ ε ὖ ζ’, etc., of the oracles, and the more or less doubtful teaching of dreams; and so down to poetry. No element of imagination has a wider range, a more magnificent use, or so colossal a grasp of sacred truth.⁴¹

Ruskin’s unusual collocation ‘eventful truth’ points us towards another important feature of the grotesque – namely, its affective dimension:

the noblest [grotesques] convey truths which nothing else could convey; and not only so, but they convey them, in minor cases with a delightfulness, – in the higher instances with an awfulness, – which no mere utterance of the symbolised truth would have possessed, but which belongs to the effort of the mind to unweave the riddle, or to the sense it has of there being an infinite power and meaning in the thing seen, beyond all that is apparent therein, giving the highest sublimity even to the most trivial object so presented and so contemplated.⁴²

This ‘effort of the mind to unweave the riddle’ is important for two interrelated reasons. Firstly, as Alison Milbank has observed, the grotesque ‘prevents any easy sense of possession by the viewer’ and thus, like the obverse levity of the icon, functions as a safeguard against idolatry.⁴³ At the same time, however, its bewildering distention of the imagination may also serve a ‘deictic’ function, since the impossibility of the object’s representation paradoxically becomes part of the signifying process. More specifically, eliciting a distention of the imagination towards an object that exceeds its grasp brings its excessiveness into view, even as its ‘whatness’ remains out of sight. As Wordsworth memorably expresses it in *The Prelude*, with a chiasmus that mimics the involutions of vision: ‘the soul /

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 103.

⁴² Ibid. p. 103.

⁴³ Alison Milbank, ‘A Fine Grotesque or a Pathetic Fallacy?: The Role of Objects in the Autobiographical Writing of Ruskin and Proust’ in *Ruskin’s Struggle for Coherence*, Rachel Dickinson and Keith Hanley (eds.) (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2006), p. 92.

Remembering how she felt, but what she felt / Remembering not' (II, 335-6). In this way, grotesque art may communicate something of what it cannot depict.

Clearly, we are in the territory here of the Romantic sublime;⁴⁴ however, Ruskin's preference for the term 'grotesque idealism' reveals his religious inflection of the notion. As he explains in *The Stones of Venice*:

the fallen human soul, at its best, must be as a diminishing glass, and that a broken one, to the mighty truths of the universe round it; and the wider the scope of its glance, and the vaster the truths into which it obtains an insight, the more fantastic their distortion is likely to be, as the winds and vapors trouble the field of the telescope most when it reaches farthest.⁴⁵

In Ruskin's view, not only does the communication of certain truths necessarily require a form of accommodation – on account of our fallen human capacities⁴⁶ – the accommodation involved is so extreme that the communication is a grotesque distortion of these truths. What can we conclude, then, from this foray into Ruskin's literary criticism?

Whilst Ruskin is well known for a critical notion that associates visions of an immanent 'excess' in nature with emotional derangement and false perception, what we find if we draw his various discussions of the subject together are three quite distinct things: (i) a tracing of historical variations in literary representations of 'excessive' life in nature, which he relates to wider historical changes in religious

⁴⁴ The foregoing construal of the grotesque shadows Kant's analytic of the sublime, which he summarily defines as: 'an object (of nature) *the representation of which determines the mind to think the unattainability of nature regarded as a presentation of Ideas.*' (*Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Publishing, 1951), p. 134.)

⁴⁵ *The Stones of Venice*, vol. 2 (London: George Allen, 1900), pp. 198-9. Ruskin goes on to distinguish explicitly between the sublime and the grotesque: 'so far as the truth is seen by the imagination in its wholeness and quietness, the vision is sublime; but so far as it is narrowed and broken by the inconsistencies of the human capacity, it becomes grotesque; and it would seem to be rare that any very exalted truth should be impressed on the imagination without some grotesqueness in its aspect, proportioned to the degree of *diminution of breadth* in the grasp which is given of it.' (Ibid. p. 199.)

⁴⁶ Ruskin emphatically affirms this point in *Modern Painters* II: 'Of no other sources than these visible can we, by any effort in our present condition of existence, conceive. For what revelations have been made to humanity inspired, or caught up to heaven of things to the heavenly region belonging, have been either by unspeakable words which it is not lawful for a man to utter, or else by their very nature incommunicable, except in types and shadows' (p. 142).

belief;⁴⁷ (ii) an account of – and the coining of a critical term for – *fallacious* perceptions of life in nature, which may be a ‘wilful fancy’ involving ‘no real expectation that it will be believed’ or else ‘a fallacy caused by an excited state of feelings, making us, for the time, more or less irrational’;⁴⁸ and (iii) a parallel complementary account of intimations of immanent ‘excess’, which are by contrast held to be *truthful* and are justified in theological terms. Thus, if we read the account of ‘pathetic fallacy’ in the context of Ruskin’s other writings on animated visions of nature it becomes clear, as Harold Bloom has observed, that the theory has been seriously misinterpreted; for what is known as ‘pathetic fallacy’ is not at all Ruskin’s only view of intimations of life in nature. Instead, it is ‘a searching criticism of Romanticism from within, for the sake of saving the Romantic program of humanizing nature from extinction through excessive self-indulgence.’⁴⁹ In other words, it is a *corrective* account, which describes the misuse of a legitimate or even necessary way of representing a sense that things in nature ‘are not only what they are’ and ‘give more than they have’.

III A Universe Tingling with Anthropomorphic Life⁵⁰

Thus far, we have seen that what is conventionally known as ‘pathetic fallacy’ may in some cases turn out to be a catachrestic strategy or fashioning of ‘icons’ that attempts to convey truths that are otherwise inexpressible. It has also been shown that this theological counter-model – in which poesis and mimesis coincide – is consonant

⁴⁷ Speaking of man’s ‘instinctive sense [...] of the Divine Presence’, he observes: ‘In the Greek it created [...] the faithfully believed gods of the elements; in Dante and the medievals, it formed the faithfully believed angelic presence: in the modern, it creates no perfect form, does not apprehend distinctly any Divine being or operation; but only a dim, slightly credited animation in the natural object, accompanied with great interest and affection for it.’ (*Modern Painters*, III, p. 285.)

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p. 164.

⁴⁹ Harold Bloom, *The Literary Criticism of John Ruskin*, p. xxv.

⁵⁰ C.S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, excluding Drama*, Bonamy Dobree, Norman Davis, and F.P. Wilson (eds.) vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 4.

with Ruskin's own writings on the subject. In this final section I want to consider, in a summary fashion, what difference this alternative theological model makes to a reading of Romantic writing. Due to constraints of space, I shall focus in detail on a single example – 'Lines Written in Early Spring' by Wordsworth (1798) – though I shall also refer to a number of well-known passages in *The Prelude* (completed in thirteen books in 1805) in which the poet reflects on his intimations of the 'one life'. Here is the poem in its entirety.

I heard a thousand blended notes,
While in a grove I sate reclined,
In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts
Bring sad thoughts to the mind.

To her fair works did Nature link
The human soul that through me ran;
And much it grieved my heart to think
What man has made of man.

Through primrose tufts, in that green bower,
The periwinkle trailed its wreaths;
And 'tis my faith that every flower
Enjoys the air it breathes.

The birds around me hopped and played,
Their thoughts I cannot measure: –
But the least motion which they made,
It seemed a thrill of pleasure.

The budding twigs spread out their fan,
To catch the breezy air;
And I must think, do all I can,
That there was pleasure there.

If this belief from heaven be sent,
If such be Nature's holy plan,
Have I not reason to lament
What man has made of man?

Exhibited in this short poem are a number of Wordsworth's central concerns and recurrent features of his poetic practice. The poem is situated in – or constructs, if you

like – a pastoral space and describes a moment of ‘wise passiveness’,⁵¹ whilst the title, which foregrounds the act of composition, tacitly links the creativity of the poet with a corresponding awakening of life in nature.⁵² This sense of connection is explicitly affirmed in stanza 2 – ‘To her fair works did Nature link / The human soul that through me ran’ – which subtly heightens the sense of agency in dissociating Nature from ‘her works’ (behind which is the higher agency of ‘heaven’, which is kept distinct from though it appears to sponsor the poet’s animistic vision). This vital connection is reinforced by the unusual phrasing ‘that through me ran’, which strikingly re-conceives the soul as something dynamic and pervasively involved in sensuous experience, in a manner that mirrors the life he sees in nature (though the phrase also dilates the soul’s capacity, as the use of ‘far’ in the ‘Boy of Winander’ passage attributes ‘infinities’ to the human heart).⁵³ Following this summary statement of his ‘creed’, the poet offers us a vision of nature, which conspicuously involves what is typically seen as ‘pathetic fallacy’: ‘And ’tis my faith that every flower / Enjoys the air it breathes’; ‘It seemed a thrill of pleasure’; ‘And I must think, do all I can, / That there was pleasure there’. How should we read this attribution of pleasure and enjoyment to non-human nature?

On the face of it, there would seem to be two options available: either it is a literal statement of belief – that flowers can ‘breathe’ and non-human phenomena experience pleasure⁵⁴ – or else it is fancy, which is to say, a metaphorical description

⁵¹ ‘Expostulation and Reply’, 24.

⁵² Cf. *The Prelude*, I, 33–45.

⁵³ I am alluding to De Quincey’s famous commentary on Wordsworth’s lines (*Articles from Tait’s Magazine and Blackwood’s Magazine, 1838–41*, Julian North (ed.) (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2003), p. 75).

⁵⁴ This is the direction a certain amount of criticism has taken. See, for example, Richard E. Matlak, who argues that the ‘romantic biology’ of Erasmus Darwin’s *Zoonomia* ‘underlies the faith of Wordsworth’s “doctrinal poems”’, which include ‘Lines Written in Early Spring’. (Matlak, *The Poetry of Relationship: The Wordsworths and Coleridge, 1797–1800* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1997), p. 114.)

that is ‘very beautiful and yet very untrue.’⁵⁵ What is opened up by the ‘iconic’ model, however, is a third way between these literal and metaphorical approaches, according to which the artist attempts to depict things ‘as they are’ paradoxically by means of figurative distortion. How does this affect our reading of the poem?

An ‘iconic’ interpretation might begin with the poem’s central intuition of something ‘excessive’ in nature. To speak of things in this abstract manner may appear to remove us from the poet’s claims, which describe a very particular feeling – namely, joy or pleasure. But the continuity of this feeling *across* phenomena – and even ontological categories – and its eventual loosening into quasi-independence (‘there was pleasure there’) suggests that what we are presented with in these lines is something more than a series of discrete experiences. Wordsworth’s favoured name for this ‘something more’ is of course the ‘one life’: ‘in all things / I saw one life, and felt that it was joy’; ‘the pulse of being everywhere was felt, / [...] One galaxy of life and joy’.⁵⁶ We shall return to the ‘one life’ and its connection to joy shortly; however, there is another feature of ‘Lines Written in Early Spring’ that supports an ‘iconic’ reading of its anthropomorphic gestures – that is, the advertised hesitancy of its affirmations: ‘And ’tis my faith’; ‘It seemed’; ‘And I must think, do all I can’. This is typical of Wordsworth, who tends to be most circumspect when he is being most bold (consider, for example, the rhizomic proliferation of modifying clauses that impede even as they prepare the way for the visionary assertion ‘we see into the life of things’

⁵⁵ Both the foregrounded religious casting of the poem (‘soul’, ‘heaven’, ‘holy plan’) and the syntax of syllogistic reasoning (if ... then) would seem to argue against this reading and suggest that something more is at stake.

⁵⁶ *The Prelude*, II, 429-30; VIII, 626-30. The connection between the ‘one life’ and joy has been helpfully elucidated by Adam Potkay in *The Story of Joy: From the Bible to Late Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). For a contextualizing discussion of the Romantics’ emphasis on the immanence of the divine and its corollary ‘animated universe’ – which is of course a counter-reaction to the eighteenth-century deistic emphasis on the transcendence of God, the corollary of which is ‘a universe of death’ – see H.W. Piper, *The Active Universe: Pantheism and the Concept of Imagination in the English Romantic Poets* (London: Athlone Press, 1962). The changes in Wordsworth’s attitude towards the ‘one life’ have been traced in detail by Jonathan Wordsworth in *William Wordsworth: The Borders of Vision* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

in ‘Tintern Abbey’). Now, this hesitancy can manifestly be interpreted in various ways. It might, for instance, be read as an indication of doubt, especially in view of the avoidance of copula certitude in ‘seems’. Yet the poet’s circumspection appears to abide alongside rather than exist at the expense of his countervailing boldness. (In Coleridge’s ‘one life’ speculation in ‘The Eolian Harp’ by contrast – ‘O! the one Life, within us and abroad, / Which meets all Motion, and becomes its soul [...] Methinks, it should have been impossible / Not to love all things in a world so fill’d’⁵⁷ – the intuition is retroactively cordoned off as a hypothesis and pushed out of being by its subjunctive positing.) Alternatively, the advertised hesitancy of Wordsworth’s claims might be a way of signaling the simultaneous operation of ‘two consciousnesses’⁵⁸ – that is, a quotidian awareness of the material realm and a visionary sense that it somehow exceeds itself or ‘gives more than it has’. We can see this kind of ‘amphibious awareness’ more clearly in the poem ‘To My Sister’ (1798):

There is a blessing in the air,
Which seems a sense of joy to yield
To the bare trees, and mountains bare,
And grass in the green field. (5-8)

Here, in a parallel moment of vision, the natural phenomena are on the one hand emphatically described as ‘bare’, whilst on the other they appear to possess or participate in a circumambient sense of joy. Now although from a secular perspective this might seem to be untenably attempting to eat one’s cake and have it, from a theological point of view it is sanely holding onto both sides of a paradox – that the created order may be more than it is – *both* of which are held to be true. (It will be recalled that Ruskin’s theological variant of ‘pathetic fallacy’ involves a similar

⁵⁷ Coleridge’s *Poetry and Prose*, Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson and Raimonda Modiano (eds.) (New York: Norton, 2004), p. 18, n. 6.

⁵⁸ *The Prelude*, II, 32.

double awareness of the ‘common uses’ or ‘forms of things’ and ‘the mysterious voices in which they talk to us about God’.) There is, however, a further possibility, for not all hesitancy reflects a problem of perception. Instead, the poet’s recourse to ‘seems’ might betoken a problem of language; that is to say, it may be an ‘apophatic’ stammer, which advertises the ‘as it were’ character of his description. It will be helpful to ponder this a little further.

In his illuminating discussion of ‘joy in the oneness of things’, Adam Potkay connects Wordsworth’s sense of ‘one life’ in *The Prelude* – and in particular his description of the ‘rapture of the hallelujah sent / From all that breathes and is’ – to the following lines from the book of Revelation: ‘I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying: Alleluia, for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth’.⁵⁹ In these lines, the use of the apophatic marker ‘as it were’⁶⁰ would seem not to reflect a shortfall of apprehension (indeed, the similitic exuberance of the description suggests on the contrary an *excess* of givenness) but rather the inadequacy of the means available for expressing it. In other words, the stammering of ‘seems’ or ‘as it were’ may be seen as the hallmark of visionary speech and the corollary of the icon’s advertised evasions of naturalistic figurations. (An alternative strategy employed by Wordsworth for exhibiting the inadequacies of language in the face of the ineffable – as part of a ‘performative’ attempt to signify the transcendent – is the kind of predicative intoxication we find in his apocalyptic vision after crossing the Alps,⁶¹ in which superfluity appears to serve an ‘aniconic’ purpose; for in generating an

⁵⁹ Potkay, *Wordsworth’s Ethics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2012), p. 83.

⁶⁰ This rendering of the Greek ὥς (hós) is translated as ‘what seemed to be’ in the English Standard Version and ‘something like’ in the New American Standard Bible. Michael Sells speaks of Plotinus’ use of the term *hoion* (as it were) as an ‘apophatic marker’ (*Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 16).

⁶¹ *The Prelude*, VI, 556-72.

overabundance of names, the poet indicates the inadequacy of any *single* name, and thus gestures towards that which is *beyond* all names.) Either way, the poet's wounding of his own articulacy seems to exemplify the principle underlying Ruskin's theory of the 'grotesque' – namely, that certain truths must suffer distortion if they are to be represented at all.⁶²

What this 'iconic' model brings into view, then, is a way out of the false dichotomy between literal truth and poetic fancy that is inscribed into the notion of 'pathetic fallacy'. More precisely, it highlights a third alternative or 'excluded middle' in which truth and fiction are intertwined such that the poet 'half-creates' what he senses to be there, and figurative language serves a *revelatory* function. John Milbank has lucidly summed up the paradoxical character of such theological poesis: 'Since God is not an object in the world, he cannot be available to us before our response to him, but in this response – our work, our gift, our art, our hymn – he is already present.'⁶³ In the case of 'Lines Written in Early Spring' it might therefore be argued that the poet's animistic envisioning of nature is neither a mere poetic fancy nor a literal statement of belief, but rather an 'iconic' or 'grotesque' attempt to represent a sense of 'the one life within us and abroad'.⁶⁴ Why does this matter?

One of the ways in which recent criticism has sought to discredit the transcendent aspirations of Romantic writing is by associating figurative language with deception and denying it any foothold in reality. Such extremism may sound improbable, but it is precisely what Ross Woodman argues in his reading of *The Prelude*: 'Every exertion of the imagination, no matter how slight, that moves the

⁶² Earlier on in Book II of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth speaks of aniconic intimations 'by form / Or image unprofaned' (325-6).

⁶³ John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 58.

⁶⁴ In his illuminating study of Wordsworth's 'poetic thinking', Simon Jarvis teases out a 'laudable' counterpart to the pejorative bestowal of moral meaning that is 'pathetic fallacy' (*Wordsworth's Philosophical Song* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)), p. 46.

mind away from a “faithful copy” in the direction of the figurative is, in some sense, an act of deception’.⁶⁵ According to Woodman, on the basis of this premise – which leads him to speak of ‘the nihilism that constitutes metaphor’ – Wordsworth’s descriptions of ‘celestial light’ and a ‘visionary gleam’ are metaphorical and therefore a ‘spell’, ‘conjunction’ or ‘delusion’.⁶⁶ Whilst a detailed engagement with Woodman’s views is obviously beyond the scope of this chapter, it is worth pointing out that this absolutist opposition between the literal (speaking of things ‘as they are’) and the figurative (defined as ‘a perfect cheat’), which structures the whole of Woodman’s reading, is problematical for a variety of reasons. One might, for example, query the ‘God trick’ involved in presuming to speak from a perspective, outside of interpretation, from where it is possible to determine conclusively what’s real, what’s delusion and whether or not there is anything ‘beyond the walls of the world’ to which our metaphors correspond. One might also question the opposition itself, which is presented as self-evident but sits uncomfortably with his invocation of Derrida, who vigorously contested this dichotomous conception and argued to the contrary that metaphoricity is a condition of language that goes all the way down.⁶⁷ One might furthermore object to the equation of figurative language with deception, which – even leaving the religious aside – ignores huge swathes of everyday experience, such as the connoisseur’s speech about wine, in which figurative language is the most *accurate* way of describing a thing.⁶⁸

The iconic alternative outlined in this chapter challenges this ‘nihilistic’ foreclosure of reference, which in limiting the reach of figurative language attempts to

⁶⁵ Woodman, ‘Wordsworth’s Crazy Bedouin: *The Prelude* and the Fate of Madness’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 27. 1 (1988), pp. 3-29.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 115-7.

⁶⁷ See Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

⁶⁸ For an extended discussion of how figurative language may be reality depicting, even when it is approximate and subject to revision, see Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

snuff out its religious significance. More positively, in upholding the ability of figural language to orient us towards what it cannot grasp, this model underwrites a theological reading of ‘pathetic fallacy’. This is not to imply that *all* instances of animistic imagining will be of theological significance (though there may be an inchoate stirring of wonder or sense of a ‘foreign luminosity’ in nature signaled in ‘conventional’ uses of the figure). What it does mean, however, is that in *some* cases ‘pathetic fallacy’ may depict intimations of a ‘more’ in nature – a fugitive ‘excess’ that irradiates the created order and calls to us through the being of what it is not – which may be dimly apprehended or lightly entertained but which betokens the operation of a religious awareness. Alison Milbank has written instructively of the grotesque: ‘The imagination and nature herself are indeed mirrors of the Divine, but dark and even shattered; and hence the grotesque is the appropriate form to bear this true but broken vision.’⁶⁹ One might similarly say of ‘pathetic fallacy’ in reverse that such figurations are often not explicitly religious, though it is precisely on account of this that they are appropriate, since what I am suggesting they represent is an incipient, shadowy or anonymous opening of the supernatural in nature. The conventional framework for making sense of this experience is ‘natural theology’.

Before concluding, it may be useful to draw a few broad distinctions. In the course of this chapter, I have connected the views of Ruskin, Augustine and Wordsworth in relation to the envisaging of an ontological surplus in nature. Whilst it is part of my argument that the former espouses an alternative religious interpretation as well, for Ruskin – in his most well-known account – this ‘surplus’ is a fictional imposition or projection that transpires in a moment of passion when the beholder is

⁶⁹ Milbank, ‘A Fine Grotesque or a Pathetic Fallacy?’, p. 93.

‘borne-away, or over-clouded, or over-dazzled by emotion’.⁷⁰ Whereas for Augustine, by contrast, the ‘becoming-articulate’ of nature is a moment of truth and a receiving in the elevated quietness of contemplation of what nature was always already declaring – namely, the glory of God. (The fact that nature speaks with hypotactic circumspection (‘not ... and yet’) underlines the sense that, rather than an interlude of passionate confusion, what Augustine is concerned with is a moment of heightened lucidity.) Wordsworth appears to hover somewhere in between these positions. This is because his vision of nature as a reciprocally speaking subject is presented as both given *and* received, as a matter of fiction *as well as* truth, and as something that points beyond itself but which leaves the nature of that ‘beyond’ opaque. The problem, I am suggesting, with the notion of ‘pathetic fallacy’ is that it elides or occludes the distinctions between these three positions.

This is especially unhelpful in Wordsworth’s case, as he is anxious to show us that he is engaged in an open and on-going process of trying to *work out* what he thinks about these possibilities, and his poetry is a *staging* of this working out. In Book II of *The Prelude*, for example, he writes:

I mean to speak
Of that interminable building rear’d
By observation of affinities
In objects where no brotherhood exists
To common minds. My seventeenth year was come
And, whether from this habit, rooted now
So deeply in my mind, or from excess
Of the great social principle of life,
Coercing all things into sympathy,
To unorganic natures I transferr’d
My own enjoyments, or, the power of truth
Coming in revelation, I convers’d
With things that really are, I, at this time
Saw blessings spread around me like a sea.
Thus did my days pass on, and now at length

⁷⁰ Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, III, p. 167.

From Nature and her overflowing soul
 I had receiv'd so much that all my thoughts
 Were steep'd in feeling; I was only then
 Contented when with bliss ineffable
 I felt the sentiment of Being spread
 O'er all that moves, and all that seemeth still,
 O'er all, that, lost beyond the reach of thought
 And human knowledge, to the human eye
 Invisible, yet liveth to the heart,
 O'er all that leaps, and runs, and shouts, and sings,
 Or beats the gladsome air, o'er all that glides
 Beneath the wave, yea, in the wave itself
 And mighty depth of waters. Wonder not
 If such my transports were; for in all things
 I saw one life, and felt that it was joy. (401-30)

Wordsworth advertises the unforced agnosticism of his ruminations in the 'or's that stipple the first part of this passage: the ecstatic intuition of the 'one life' is either a projection ('I transferr'd / My enjoyments') or it is a moment of privileged vision, ascribed to the exceptional mind of the beholder (the 'observation of affinities / In objects where no brotherhood exists / To common minds') or else it is 'revealed', with the implication – left unclear by the whenceless 'coming' – that a supernatural third-party is involved.⁷¹ The lines, however, have a 'dramatic' quality, since it is in their *unfolding* that they show us the poet in the act of thinking.⁷² Christopher Ricks has identified a beautifully poignant use of enjambment earlier on in Book II that helps to illustrate this point:

the moon to me was dear;
 For I could dream away my purposes,
 Standing to gaze upon her while she hung
 Midway between the hills, as if she knew
 No other region, but belonged to thee,
 Yea, appertained by a peculiar right
 To thee and thy grey huts, thou one dear Vale! (191-7)

⁷¹ The poet similarly holds open a range of options in Book III of *The Prelude*: 'To every natural form, rock, fruit or flower, / Even the loose stones that cover the high-way, I gave a moral life; I saw them feel, / Or linked them to some feeling' (130-3).

⁷² For a general discussion of this phenomenon, see Donald Davie, *Articulate Energy: An Inquiry into the Syntax of English Poetry* (London: Routledge, 1955).

As a result of the line-break after ‘knew’, it is, as Ricks astutely observes, ‘with a gentle shock of mild surprise [that we find] *knew* was not as in *savoir* but as in *connaître*. Upon the brink of the real, there trembled our imagining that the moon *knew*; the attribution of the pathetic fallacy has seldom been made with such pathos, and the rescinding of the fallacy has seldom been made with such gentleness.’⁷³ Later on in *The Prelude*, though, in the lines I have quoted, we find a reversal of this miniature elegiac drama:

I mean to speak
Of that interminable building rear’d
By observation of affinities
In objects where no brotherhood exists
To common minds.

In this case, the lines appear to begin with a sense of pathos that ‘no brotherhood exists’. And yet, once again we discover ‘with a gentle shock of mild surprise’ that it is only to ‘common minds’ that it doesn’t exist, and that what appeared to have been wistfully rescinded is in fact restored the other side of the line-break. Indeed, rather than eliciting a momentary enchantment, the enjambment here is like a passing shadow, which leaves the vision of kinship intact. It is the sense of separation that turns out to be a fallacy.

This ‘dramatic’ dimension to Wordsworth’s verse doesn’t just reinforce what is explicitly said. Instead, the formal patterning of the poem’s syntax has an ‘eventfulness’ of its own, which is involved in the evocation of its speaker’s interiority; for in staging this activity or *evolution* of thought – in the readerly temporality of the lines’ unfolding – the poet is able to signal he is aware that this

⁷³ Ricks, ‘Wordsworth: “A Pure Organic Pleasure from the Lines”, in *Essays in Criticism*, vol. XXI (1971), p. 27.

might be a projection, and yet, nonetheless, in spite of this awareness, is sufficiently convinced to venture the assertion.

We should register, finally, two further complications of the poet's 'giving' or creative perception. In the first place, we should note that his agnosticism with respect to causality is folded into a superordinate affirmative assertion, which suggests – whatever his doubts about the whence – there is no doubt *that* he receives something from nature. In the second place, whilst the poet makes clear that the act of perception involves some sort of 'giving' or creative element (a 'plastic power', a 'forming hand' and an 'auxiliar light'),⁷⁴ this 'giving' is performed by something that comes from but is curiously not coextensive with the subject. It is, the poet consistently maintains, a 'spirit of its own' and a power that 'abode' with him.⁷⁵ Now although Wordsworth, characteristically, is not inclined to be very precise in naming this 'something', he appears – in a manner that is consonant with a Christian conception of the self – to conceive of the subject as self-transcending or containing within itself an otherness that exceeds it.⁷⁶ In a Lacanian idiom, we might say there is something in it more than itself; or as Wordsworth writes later on in *The Prelude*: 'Our destiny, our nature, and our home / Is with infinitude' (VI, 538-9). What this means in terms of our general discussion is firstly that the poet's 'giving' is, itself, in some sense *received*, since it is performed by that which is part of and yet other than the self (the lineaments of this paradoxical subjectivity are exhibited in the closing lines of the verse paragraph, in which the poet seems to feel acted upon from without by that which he has himself engendered: 'Hence by obeisance, my devotion hence, / And hence my transport'); and secondly that his 'giving' isn't a decorative or deceptive fancy but is instead an

⁷⁴ II, 381; 382; 387.

⁷⁵ II, 382; 384. See also lines 328-9, in which he speaks of the 'visionary power' that came strengthened with 'a superadded soul, / A virtue not its own'.

⁷⁶ Significantly, the poet repeatedly refers to his 'soul' in the preceding lines (II, 233; 244-5; 337; 351 and 371-2).

‘iconic’ fashioning of a ‘foreign luminosity’ that suffuses creation but which exceeds all determinate representations. Where, then, does this leave us, if we gather all of these complications together?

For Wordsworth, it seems, the moment of vision is a creative act. However, such creativity is not – *pace* Woodman – set over against the truth; it is, rather, as Flannery O’Connor describes it, a distortion that reveals.⁷⁷ The poet can affirm this, on the one hand, because the created order is of its nature self-giving or ‘ecstatic’, which he posits as a reality *irrespective* of what he creatively bestows – with the paradoxical proviso that such ‘giving’ is needed to reveal what’s there; and, on the other hand, because the poet’s giving turns out to involve a form of receiving – namely, the gift of being more than we are, by virtue of the infinite origin and destiny inscribed at the very heart of our being. Which is, I suppose, another way of saying there is ‘one life within us and abroad’.

⁷⁷ ‘Novelist and Believer’, in *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970), p. 162.